

Developing an evaluation community in Romania: requirements, reflections and recommendations

Silvestrini, Stefan

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Developing an Evaluation Community in Romania

Requirements, Reflections and Recommendations

Stefan Silvestrini

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Reflections and Recommendations

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BEZUG: Centrum für Evaluation (CEval)
Universität des Saarlandes
Postfach 15 11 50
D-66041 Saarbrücken
info@ceval.de



oder kostenfrei zum Download:
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1. The Speaker

Mr. Stefan Silvestrini is Head of the Department for Development Cooperation and Education and Senior Fellow at the Centre for Evaluation (CEval) in Saarbruecken, Germany.

Mr. Silvestrini is a sociologist by background and, since 2004, focuses on evaluation and assessment related subjects. Mr. Silvestrini is a specialist in evaluation methodologies, with a focus on participatory methods of evaluation. Mr. Silvestrini has led a variety of major evaluation assignments in recent years and has extensive experience in leading seminars and workshops socio-economic subjects, including evaluation of educational policies.

2. The Center for Evaluation (CEval)

The Center for Evaluation is a research institute at the faculty of applied human sciences, operated under the professorship of Mr. Reinhard Stockmann. It contributes to the advancement of evaluation research and the fulfillment of the steadily increasing demand for evaluations in Germany and Europe in several ways:

Firstly it undertakes fundamental research by developing theoretical and methodological principles as well as professional scientific standards for the evaluation of programs and measures. Outcomes of these ambitions are amongst others the book series “socio-scientific evaluation research”, of which some volumes have already been translated in English, Spanish and Chinese, and other publications as well as articles appearing in scientific journals and working papers.

Secondly the CEval promotes evaluation expertise through the development and provision of qualification schemes. Among these efforts are for instance

- ✓ the extra-occupational study course “Master of Evaluation”, that was launched together with the Saarland University, the University of Applied Sciences Saarbruecken and the Catholic University for Social Services in Summer 2004, which was the first of its kind in Germany,
- ✓ the training program for evaluators in the field of development cooperation, called FEEZ, in cooperation with the AGEF international consulting services, where evaluation practitioners in this field get qualified in methodological aspects as well as practical implementation issues.
- ✓ Furthermore the CEval conducts a range of different training and capacity building programs for individual national and international clients in the field of development cooperation, education, social services, environmental protection, labor market, culture and sustainable development. Through these activities cooperations with training institutions in Latin America, Africa and Asia have been established.

Thirdly the CEval carries out mission oriented research projects and provides consultation services in the field of evaluation. In this regard it is mainly contracted by German and European governmental institutions such as the European Union, the Federal Ministry for Eco-

conomic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) or the KfW Banking Group as well as by non-governmental organizations, for example the German Academic Exchange Service DAAD), Plan International or the Protestant Development Services (EED).

Finally the CEval is promoting the professional information exchange in the field of evaluation through extensive networking activities and events such as the EASY-ECO conference and training series that is aiming at young academics in the field of sustainable development. Professor Stockmann is also the executive editor of the German speaking Journal for Evaluation, which is the central publishing organ of the German evaluation community that is organized within the DeGEval. Within this society the CEval is also active in different working groups supporting the further development of scientific standards in various fields.

3. Introduction

The speech is divided in three parts: In the first part some thoughts about the features of an 'ideal evaluation community' are presented. The core question will be: What are the main aspects that have to be taken into account when building up such a professional entity?

The second part contains some reflections on what has been written about the current state of the Romanian evaluation culture and practice in the Evaluation Action Program from the Ministry of Finance.

Finally the presentation closes with some recommendations developed by the DeGEval, the German Speaking Society for Evaluation that could help to foster the progress of developing a professional evaluation community in Romania.

4. Ideas about an 'Ideal Evaluation Community'

Thinking about developing a professional evaluation community leads to the four basic functions of evaluation – the provision of knowledge, the support of control, the initiation and establishment of a learning process and the development of a foundation for legitimization – and to the question how an environment has to be configured so that evaluation can achieve these functions. It is obvious that the answer determines the characteristics of an evaluation community as it indicates the implications for its elements.

In this regard two major aspects have to be highlighted that distinguish evaluation from fundamental research in particular and therefore are highly relevant:

1. Evaluation always follows a practical orientation.
2. Evaluation is rarely done within a scientifically controlled environment.

The results of an evaluation study are usually used for some particular purpose and not only for the generation of scientific knowledge. So as evaluation is always science for practice, its results have to comply with certain requirements that differ significantly from a solely scientific framework.

Whether it is an “analysis for policy” – that means when evaluation is done to improve future strategies in a particular area of action – or if it is an “analysis of policy” – that means if evaluation is done to gain information about how far a certain strategy has led to the intended results – the fact that evaluation always has to meet the information demands of specified stakeholder groups makes it mandatory that the qualification of an evaluator has to go beyond a scientific training.

This leads to the prerequisites of an appropriate evaluation community: While a scientist can always claim that his or her work only has to follow the principle of finding the truth no matter of its relevance for anyone, the evaluator always has to justify the practical benefit of his or her research.

Hence the demands for an evaluator are comparably diffuse, including scientific as well as managerial and organizational competences that have to be covered within the training of evaluators and the development of evaluation competences within the institutions that deal with these issues.

Thinking about capacity building as one essential element of an evaluation community, training on evaluation cannot only focus on theoretical and methodological aspects, in terms of how to collect, analyze and interpret data, but has always also to think along practical aspects of the implementation process of an evaluation study such as communication and mediation skills, the capability of adequate stakeholder involvement and reporting or organizational issues.

Talking about the methodological framework further prerequisites come into mind: Since many methodological controversies have shown that there is no “one way of evaluating”, it can be concluded that evaluation research is always as well the search for the best combination of instruments and techniques for the analysis of a given evaluation object.

Accordingly it is not the question if an evaluation strategy should follow a quantitative, econometric, operational or qualitative, socio-scientific approach. In fact it has to be asked what the different disciplines can contribute to the further development of the methodological framework. Hence the disciplinary borders have to be overcome in order to allow a transdisciplinary approach of evaluation research – that is to distinguish from interdisciplinarity by its lifeworldly reference.

This makes it all the more relevant to shed also a light on the social and cultural context of evaluation practice: Since evaluation should be transdisciplinary, it also has to relate to the local particularities. Hence it is virtually impossible just to “copy and paste” any kind of evaluation culture from one country to another. It is not enough to take over the findings about “what works” in one society and to design a comparable framework in another.

Just like program implementation itself the design of an evaluation varies with the environment where it takes place. Thereby the difference lies not so much in the methodological concept of evaluation but in the just mentioned practical aspects that can differ considerably between nations, regions, communities, groups or even individual stakeholders.

Questions like “What is appropriate stakeholder participation?” or “How should evaluation results be communicated?” cannot be answered globally. In fact the understanding of the local socio-cultural framework is crucial in order to give an adequate answer. Therefore eva-

evaluation standards have to be customized not only regarding methodological demands but also regarding the local cultural framework.

Two cognitions are important lessons learnt in Germany: First that there is not “one” profession alone that can fulfill the capacity demands of an evaluation community. And second: That it is essential to deploy a culturally adapted evaluation approach that meets the regional attitude regarding this kind of investigation. Only then evaluation results will be widely accepted and thus used accordingly for steering decisions.

Coming from the “provision of insight function” of evaluation to its “learning function” which leads to the second aspect: Unlike fundamental research evaluation is rarely done in a controlled environment where the outcomes of an analysis are organized and stored systematically.

Usually evaluations are done for a certain institution or organization. Crosscutting issues are not necessarily communicated between clients or implementers. This leads accordingly to a rather deficient knowledge management within the evaluation community if not dedicated counteraction is undertaken.

When evaluation has a learning function not only within a given program context but also for the improvement of intervention measures in general, then it has to include some sort of a memory capacity. Memory for the results of evaluations, that means knowledge about what works – and memory for the methodology and design of evaluations, that means to save evaluation expertise.

Therefore a systematic knowledge and expertise management is essential for the effectiveness of an evaluation community. It is obvious that this can only be achieved by an adequate organization of evaluation competences in corresponding institutions.

Thinking further about the other primary functions of evaluation “controlling” and “legitimization”, another prerequisite can be identified: The regular implementation of evaluation studies.

In order to obtain knowledge about the efficiency of a program, information about comparable interventions is needed. The judgment if a program concept is appropriate, if it uses its resources efficiently and leads to the desired results in the intended way or if the executives do the right things usually has to relate to alternative approaches.

To put it simply: If you say that something is bad you should know how to make it better. And in order to prove how to make it better it is best to have empirical evidence. Therefore objects of comparison, which ideally are generated by evaluations under the same socio-cultural conditions, are very helpful.

Regular implementation supports also the function of evaluation as an instrument to create legitimacy. Only when evaluation proves to reliably identify the worth of an intervention measure, it will be accepted as a tool for the analysis of and for policy by its stakeholders. – Again to deliver this proof empirical evidence through practical implementation is necessary.

So the pillars of a professional evaluation community are:

1. Transdisciplinary fundamental research combining qualitative as well as quantitative data collection and analysis instruments and techniques from different specialist areas.

2. Comprehensive capacity building comprising not only scientific expertise but also practical know-how about the aspects of the implementation process of an evaluation.
3. Adequate standardization that takes internationally accepted guidelines as well as local cultural specifics into account, in order to achieve highest stakeholder acceptance.
4. Regular implementation of evaluations in order to develop a comprehensive database for future evaluations and thus to provide experience to future generations of evaluators.

Keeping these premises in mind will surely foster the development of a sophisticated evaluation culture that meets the expectation of the clients and implementers of evaluations in the long run.

5. Current State of the Romanian Evaluation Culture and Practice

The Romanians advantage in comparison to most other European countries is the fact that it can learn from the mistakes and good practices of other nations that have started earlier in establishing an evaluation community. This chance, not to make the same mistakes again, should be used efficiently by international exchange with evaluation experts – the present conference is a good example for that – but also with the clients of evaluations and the users of their results.

The advantage of such a multilateral approach for the exchange of excellence is that the utility of evaluations is not only declaimed by the ones who have an intrinsic motivation to perform these kinds of investigations, but it can also be demonstrated strikingly by its beneficiaries. This can help to convince as well those who are presently acting reluctant regarding evaluation as a management tool.

As stated in article 2.3 in the Evaluation Action Programme: “Evaluation has not yet emerged as a desirable management instrument. Nor is it routinely applied for rationalizing public expenditure, financial management and the allocation of resources in pursuit of national socio-economic development objectives.”

Experience shows that the visualization of the factual benefit of an evaluation by its stakeholders can have much more impact on decision makers than lectures from evaluators themselves. This might also help to diminish what is called in the above mentioned document “the RRF-factor” (RRF stands for “resistance, reluctance and fear”).

Another aspect that has to be mentioned is that in the Evaluation Action Programme yet a quite efficiency concentrated way of thinking about evaluation is prevalent. Although efficiency is one of the main criteria that have to be taken into account when it comes to assessing the value of an intervention, the importance of two other aspects has to be highlighted: Impact in general and Sustainability.

Measuring the worth or merit of an action does not only imply the analysis of its resource allocation or workflow, but also looking more deeply at its effects – whether they were intended or not.

It makes a difference for the design and implementation of evaluation instruments if you just look on how much has been done with the money or what exactly is the impact on the different stakeholders of a program. It would be better to go for the latter one when elaborating an evaluation culture, even if that means that it takes more efforts, as this strategy seems to be more promising for the improvement of public intervention measures.

The same counts for sustainability. How long will the presently caused effects last and, much more important, how likely is it that it leads to further intended effects? Therefore a holistic perspective is necessary that focuses on all relevant aspects of program implementation and impact in order to allow substantiated policy advice.

Another aspect that should be stressed and that is somehow related to the one before is the potential of ex-ante evaluations. In article 3.5 of the Evaluation Action Programme it says: “The National Evaluation Strategy addresses evaluation across the full spectrum of evaluation – ex-ante, interim and ex-post evaluation. While all three areas are being addressed, the NES pays particular attention to the management-related ex-post and interim evaluation.”

By doing so you are giving away an important chance for improving the quality of the results for formative and retrospective oriented analyses. Baseline- and feasibility studies, impact assessments and risk-analyses provide very important information for the preparation of later investigations.

On the one hand, the development of indicators at an early stage of the program planning process facilitates considerably the following data collection and analysis. Only with an elaborated, program adapted indicator grid it is possible to maintain an ongoing monitoring system that is crucial for the program management as well as for its final evaluation. Often it happens to evaluators when they go in the field that no information has been collected to the point when the investigation starts. It is easy to imagine that starting at zero takes unequally more effort to come to comprehensible evaluation results than having a reasonable database of the program implementation.

On the other hand it is self-evident that baseline-data is crucial for the assignment of impact. As in most cases it is impossible to apply experimental research designs within evaluation studies – which means with a treatment and a control group – longitudinal designs, where the present state of an area of action is compared with its initial situation, are inevitable. This is even more relevant in times where rigorous impact measurement gets more and more en vogue.

The last aspect focuses on the lack of a common understanding of evaluation, that is also described in the Evaluation Action Programme. – Why not initiate a public discourse on this matter?

Experience shows that the medial reflection of an issue of public interest – which evaluation is without a doubt for tax payers – has often had a bigger impact on political and economical decision makers than the advice of a few experts – no matter how rationale their advices may be. This public discourse of course has to be steered by the experts to give it the right direction.

6. Recommendations by the DeGEval Regarding a Supportive Evaluation Culture

The last part of the keynote deals with a policy document of the DeGEval that has been released just last autumn on the occasion of its eleventh annual conference in Klagenfurt, Austria. The document is called “Steering...” (or you might say control or even governance) “...needs Evaluation”.

Regarding the ambitions and efforts to develop further the Romanian evaluation community, the conclusions drawn in this document fit perfectly to the present conference as they outline the conditions for a convenient evaluation culture. Therefore the presentation closes with a summary of the recommendations from this paper:

“Modern societies are characterized by complex steering decisions in which economy, politics, education, the social systems and further stakeholders follow partly opposing interests with different logics of action. And as the world wide financial crisis shows, the globalization of markets leads to further requirements regarding steering procedures.

In the last years evaluations became more and more important in every field of policy and practice. They can deliver substantiated information for the improvement of organizational activities and provide the results to the experts for further development. From the viewpoint of the DeGEval this is seen as both – a chance and a risk.

A chance in so far as evaluations can improve steering procedures by providing secured knowledge and transparent assessment. – A risk in the respect that evaluations could be misused for the legitimization of political decisions and that, with increasing demands and often little budgets, they are lacking necessary quality standards.

The linkage between evaluations and decision-making processes is an essential premise to support the decision-makers in politics, economy and other fields of action in developing a reflexive attitude, to fortify steering with factual know-how and to appraise impact. Therewith evaluations will contribute to an evidence-based policy making and implementation practice.

In summary following recommendations are given in order to establish appropriate conditions for the utilization of evaluations for rationale steering:

1. If evaluations shall support steering decisions then obligatory agreements about the form and transparency for the utilization of evaluation results are necessary. Unclear or missing agreements about the use without an orientation at the demands of the potential users reduce the steering relevance of evaluations.
2. In order to comply with methodological and field specific standards it is necessary to define an appropriate timeframe for the implementation of evaluations. In order to discuss the feasibility of evaluation designs with the client, evaluators should be embedded early in the formulation of the goals and the design of the instruments of programs, strategies and institutions.
3. For the implementation of evaluations appropriate resources have to be provided. While on the one hand the number of evaluations is steadily rising on the other hand

necessary financial resources are often not available. However methodologically ‘clean’ evaluations cannot be realized without adequate funding.

4. The decision about who to assign with the implementation of an evaluation should also follow professional standards. These standards should as well define the relationship between the client and the evaluator and the implementation workflow of the evaluation.
5. Evaluators have to be qualified adequately in order to deliver reliable and usable results. The necessary qualification comprises methodological know-how, field proficiency, evaluation experience, social competences and knowledge about different evaluation approaches and models.
6. Evaluations should match nationally and internationally accepted standards on which the stakeholders agree bindingly.”

All of those recommendation are self explaining and obvious to everyone who has already evaluation experience. It is now their duty to disseminate this knowledge among those who do not have this know-how but are in need of evaluation – whether they know it or not.

Thank you very much for your attention!

Contact:

Center for Evaluation (CEval)

Stefan Silvestrini

Senior policy advisor development cooperation and education

P.O. Box: 15 11 50

66041 Saarbruecken, Germany

Phone: +49 - 6 81 - 3 02 - 33 20

Fax: +49 - 6 81 - 3 02 - 38 99

E-Mail: s.silvestrini@ceval.de

URL: www.ceval.de